Politics between justification and defiance

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Abstract

The article discusses the status and role of politics – in its various facets – in the pragmatic sociology of critique. We focus on a number of different dimensions of politics – politics-as-justification, politics-as-distribution, politics-as-constitution, and politics-as-defiance – that can said to be of importance for a pragmatic sociology of critique, but that have not all been taken up equally in this approach. We situate pragmatic sociology in a tradition of thought that views politics as emerging in the settlement of disputes over differences without resorting to violence. However, we argue that pragmatic sociology tends to ignore questions of the constitution of politics, and suggest that one way of bringing the foundational aspect upfront is by conceptualizing and studying defiance, including forms of explicit (dissent) and implicit critique (resistance) of the existing order.

The majority of approaches to modern democracy – either in political theory, political scientific studies, or political sociology – ultimately understands the democratic polity as a realizable and perfectionable project. In this, much of the theorizing going on is about a-prioristically identifying the sets of premises and principles on which a well-ordered, well-functioning, and just political order is to be based. There is, in this, a tendency to identify a singular (set of) principles, or at most a limited form of a variety of principles (as in John Rawls' dual principles). One of the intrinsic problems with such approaches – identified here by the label of 'monistic' approaches – is that politics and political dispute – which could in general be understood as emerging from the irreducible differences in

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understanding which rules are to arrange for the life in common – ultimately take a backstage in such theorizations. In other words, what would seem to be one of the main distinctive dimensions of modern democracy, that is, that of a political community that is continuously being construed on legitimations found within society itself (rather than by means of references to transcendent or otherworldly phenomena) and which is therefore always potentially open to critique, renewal, and innovation, seems to be eliminated or at least downplayed.

In our view, a more promising approach, in terms of a political sociology of democracy, can be developed by drawing on what has been variously referred to as the 'sociology of critical capacity', the 'sociology of dispute', the pragmatic sociology of critique', or 'French pragmatism'. The latter has not been originally developed as a form of theorizing democracy and democratic politics, but might provide important insights and lessons for a more pluralistic and political view of democracy. As is well known, this approach has been most prominently developed in Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot's *On Justification: Economies of Worth* (2006) (hereafter *OJ*), as well as in other subsequent works by these two authors, such as Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello's *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (2005) (hereafter *NSC*), Michèle Lamont and Laurent Thévenot's *Rethinking Comparative Cultural Sociology* (2000) (hereafter *CCS*), and, more recently, Laurent Thévenot's *L'Action au Pluriel* (2006) (hereafter *AP*) and Luc Boltanski's *De La Critique* (2009) (hereafter *DLC*).[1]

The pluralistic approach as found in pragmatic sociology offers, in our view, a number of 'remedies' for the problematic view that regards democracy as ultimately closed and as having transcended forms of constitutional or meta-politics (i.e., politics in the sense of disputes over its meaning). Such 'remedies' include: a pluralistic view of principles of justice, the recognition of intersocietal differences in the moral-political evaluation of democracy (in this problematizing a universalistic and closed view of the modern, democratic polity[2]), and a more dynamic analytical view of the political process and its intrinsically conflictive nature.

In our view, a political sociology of democracy – of which we will attempt to outline some basic features in this article – should account for a form of politics that emerges from both a plurality of democratic repertoires (which Boltanski and Thévenot have defined as 'regimes of justification') and the way in which these repertoires are contextually used, resisted, and criticized in practice by social actors on the ground. In this, the study of democratic societies cannot remain on the normative-theoretical or procedural-institutional level, but needs to engage with the cultural and ideological dimensions of democracy, and with actual political practice. In this, a sociology of democracy can build on *OJ* in that it maps the ways in which actors deploy justifications and criticize existing arrangements, in this raising the issue of the irreducible nature of difference, and the continuous need for justification and compromise.

While pragmatic sociology is a very useful source for elaborating a political sociology of democracy, we believe that a number of issues – in particular, relating to the status and role of politics – are in need of further clarification or more refined elaboration. One important point of critique that we will engage with in this article is, as in particular raised by Paul Ricoeur (1994, 1995), that also in pragmatic sociology, at least in the original statement of *OJ*, the status of politics remains ultimately ambiguous and underspecified.

The argument will proceed as follows. First, we briefly revisit and evaluate the claims regarding a plurality of justificatory regimes being made in pragmatic sociology, and relate this to a pluralistic and open-ended view of democracy. In this, we relate pragmatic sociology to a specific strand of understanding politics – as can be found, for instance, in Hannah Arendt's work – which sees democratic politics as inherently about an imperative of justification, and thus as about conflict over meaning. Second, we discuss to what extent it can be said that the dimensions of change and constitution are adequately taken into account in pragmatic sociology. Third, we relate pragmatic sociology to a distinct set of approaches in democratic theory. And, fourth, we suggest to complement pragmatic sociology – in order to strengthen its critical dimension – with the notion of politics-as-defiance as an addendum to, or further elaboration of, 'regimes of critique'.

Plurality and politics-as-justification

As Paul Ricoeur has argued, 'the question 'which principles of justice?' makes us understand that there exists a plurality of principles of justice' (Ricoeur, 1995: 71). One could argue, with Hannah Arendt, that it is the inescapable fact that societies are made up of 'men in the plural', or, in other words, the 'human condition of plurality' (Arendt, 1998: 4, 7), and the fact that different human beings will make sense of the world in different and often irreducible ways, that necessitates politics. As Arendt has argued, '[w]hile all aspects of the human condition are somehow related to politics, this plurality is specifically *the* condition – not only the *conditio sine qua non,* but the *conditio per quam* – of all political life' (1998: 7).

An understanding of democratic society as ultimately based on a plurality of principles is at the heart of pragmatic sociology. This plurality is conceptualized as a variety of regimes of justification, 'polities', or 'cities' (i.e., the market, industrial, domestic, civic, inspired polities, and the polity of fame), which are not merely relevant for political claims-making in political society, but more importantly refer to discursive action that emerges in all sorts of everyday disputes between ordinary individuals. The polities are themselves grounded in, or better, systematized by, political philosophy (*OJ*). In this, the latter is taken to elucidate a 'grammar of political bonds' (*OJ*: 13). Pluralism is at the basis of politics since, as Boltanski and Thévenot argue, societies do not consist of *Edens*, in which everyone is similar, and therefore no need for political interaction emerges (cf. Ricoeur, 1994: 284–85), but rather display differentiation which necessitates the justification of action, tests to provide proof, and the active construction of social order (*OJ*: 74–75).

It is from this irreducible plurality that the need for politics and, with it, the imperative of justification emerge. In Western political thought, there is indeed an important thread of reflection that regards justification as intrinsic to politics as such. In *The Human Condition*, for instance, Hannah Arendt (1998: 26–7) observed that, for the Greeks,

> To be political, to live in a *polis*, meant that everything was decided through words and persuasion and not through force and violence. In Greek self-understanding, to force people by violence, to command rather than persuade, were prepolitical ways to deal with people characteristic of life outside of the *polis*, of home and family life, where the household head

ruled with uncontested, despotic powers, or of life in the barbarian empires of Asia, whose despotism was frequently liked to the organization of the household.

From this point of view, justification first appears in the history of Western political thought as something that is opposed to violence precisely because the sphere of politics is defined on the basis of *lógos* and arguments, which prevents – or at least temporarily suspends – resort to violence. The political sphere, or more generally the public sphere, appears as inherently characterized by an *imperative to justify* one's position-taking and action.

It is possible to include, at least in part, *OJ* in this line of thinking about politics as justification. As Ricoeur puts it, the main question from which this work starts is: 'How to justify agreement and manage disagreement without succumbing to violence?' (Ricoeur, 1994: 276). Boltanski and Thévenot (*OJ*, 1999; cf. also Corcuff, 1998) provide, in this, an insightful and original analysis of justification as a complex social practice in the public domain. The authors regard a justification as something that basically aims at overcoming disagreement or conflict among parties by pointing to a 'higher common principle'. In this, a strong social pressure exists to produce justifications:

> [t]he one who criticizes other persons must produce justifications in order to support their criticisms just as the person who is the target of these criticisms must justify his or her actions in order to defend his or her cause. (Boltanski and Thévenot, 1999: 360)

Following Wagner (1999: 346), what characterizes Boltanski and Thévenot's sociology of justification is a combination of

> an observation of situated actions, where situations are always in need of interpretation (as indeed in interactionism), with the analysis of the registers of justification and evaluation, which are mobilized in the situation but transcend it, and the study of the elaboration of devices (*dispositifs*), both material and cognitive, that are meant to stabilize situations and can potentially create widely extended and relatively durable social phenomena (this being the usual domain of macrosociology).

What the authors aim at developing is, in short, a practical grammar of the political bond.

The status of politics in pragmatic sociology

Pragmatic sociology is thus founded on an explicit sensibility to a plurality of justifications – or, in its own specific language, 'polities' or 'cities' – invoking different views of the common good. In this, it can be said to theorize the nature of, and map the repertoires used in, public disputes in democratic polities.[3] Among the advantages of this approach is that it takes the competences, narratives, and justifications of ordinary actors seriously.

At the same time, the critique has been raised, in particular by Paul Ricoeur, that the role of politics and the political is ambiguous in *OJ* (Ricoeur, 1994, 1995). From Ricoeur's work, a dual view of politics emerges (cf. Ricoeur, 2007): at the level of everyday life, politics is about the social distribution of public goods as well as the political government needed to ensure a polity's continuity; at a rather different, historical level,

politics precedes this first notion and is about the genesis or instituting of a polity, and the demarcation of different spheres (the political, the economic, the cultural spheres, etc.) within it.[4]

In pragmatic sociology politics primarily emerges then as an everyday phenomenon (more related to the first understanding), manifesting itself in distinct contexts or situations, in an explicit recognition of disputes as immanent to modern, pluralistic societies – as in Hannah Arendt's view of the 'human condition of plurality'. Here, the need for justification emerges in the resolution of such disputes. But the second phenomenon of politics described by Ricoeur – in the sense of foundational disputes and struggles over the form of an ideal polity – is largely left unaddressed, at least in *OJ*.

One could reformulate this by arguing that there are at least four dimensions of politics that are relevant to pragmatic sociology. First, *politics-as-justification* (which we related to the Arendtian tradition of politics as non-violence above) is explicitly conceptualized in the recognition of irreducible plurality, and a related variety of polities or regimes of justification that help to resolve disputes. A second dimension, *politics-as-distribution*, is conceptualized as the 'civic polity' and relegated to one particular mode of justification which invokes the public interest.[5] A third dimension, *politics-as-constitution*, is the most problematic, in that it is never made clear how a particular constellation of regimes of justification, related to a distinct ideal polity, emerges. This question is particularly important because it seems to us that it is only in distinct political regimes that politics-as-justification and the related plurality of principles of worth can actually emerge.[6] This brings us to the fourth dimension, *politics-as-defiance*, which relates the issue of foundation to radical critique of the instituted order.

To return to Ricoeur's critique, politics is then not confined to disputes over 'grandeur' or 'worth', and the establishment of 'equivalence' on its basis, but has distinct qualities of its own that transcend everyday disputes (and in certain ways enable the latter), and which are directly related to the constitutive questions of sovereignty, political violence, and the origins of politics. It is this dimension that raises most clearly issues of the foundations and the ideal nature of the polity, the 'unitary context' of justificatory regimes, and the institutionalized possibilities for change.

Justification, critique, and the political

At least in one reading, then, there is a relative negligence in *OJ* of the question of the emergence, and shifts between (the predominance of) distinct sets of, and compromises between, regimes of justification that characterize specific political communities (Wagner, 1999: 352). In this, the understanding of politics in pragmatic sociology remains relatively limited, that is, it is related to the political languages that emerge in disputes, as well as to questions of redistribution of a more general kind, but the level of meta-politics is largely absent.

Recently, distinct attempts to include these issues, even if perhaps not always directly intended as addressing the questions raised here, have, however, been made. Indeed, the questions of membership of a collective polity (raising the issue of commonality) and the specific compositions of regimes of justifications within distinct polities have been taken up in Lamont and Thévenot's *CCS*. Thévenot has further made important conceptual

steps towards addressing issues of power, empowerment, and authority (see Thévenot, 2010a, 2010b, forthcoming b), as well as highly interesting moves towards a differentiation between various ways of creating commonality 'below' the level of public regimes of justification (see Thévenot, 2006; forthcoming a). But it is perhaps the work of Boltanski which most systematically addresses questions related to politics-as-constitution (regarding change and displacement, domination and power, and radical forms of critique). In Boltanski's more recent work, he has attempted (with Eve Chiapello) to incorporate a historical dimension of change into the approach (in particular in *NSC*). And in particular in his latest book, *DLC*, he addresses issues of political power, domination, and critique in an elaborated way.

The question of change

Let us first turn to the issue of political change and the displacement of regimes of justification. The issue of the emergence of regimes of justification, and more in particular their modification and displacement, while less central to *OJ*, has recently been picked up more prominently. In *NSC*, a historical exploration of shifting cultural narratives, in this case 'spirits' of capitalism, and the role of distinct forms of critique ('social' and 'artistic') in helping to bring such shifts about, are of central importance. Indeed, critique is assigned the 'role of a motor in changes in the spirit of capitalism' (*NSC*: 27). There is an explicit focus on the shifting cultural conditions that continue to sustain capitalism, as well as the emergence of new spirits after moments of crisis and sustained critique. And in Boltanski's *DLC*, questions concerning (the possibilities of) critique and political change have been put even more at the centre. Indeed, the issues of domination (related to 'historical situations in which the labour of critique finds itself greatly impeded', *DLC*: 14), its institutionalization, and possibilities of a *métacritique* and of emancipation, are key concerns in *DLC*. Boltanski's focus is on the relation of critique to society's institutions (*DLC*: 85), which are central in their guise as beings that transcend the individual point of view. In this, they are 'without a body' (*être sans corps*) 'to which is delegated the task to say what is that which is'. Institutions have thus a 'semantic function', which means they have the task of defining and confirming what is important (*DLC*: 117), or, in other words, the task of the 'construction of reality' (*DLC*: 129). But existing institutions only exist in as far they are 'suscitated by means of interaction and their repetition in the course of action' (*DLC*: 125), and can, in this, be both confirmed and criticized. The latter possibility emerges not least from the fact that institutions are grounded in an attempt to close the gap between the world (*monde*) and reality (*realité*), or, in other words, to complete the (ultimately impossible) task of defining 'what is that which is'. Boltanski speaks here of a 'hermeneutic contradiction', which ultimately emerges from the tension between a fragile reality (because constructed through institutions (*la réalité construite*)) and a world which can never be fully captured by such institutions (*DLC*: 140). This tension makes institutions both 'necessary and fragile, beneficiary and abusive' (*DLC*: 130).

Also in Thévenot's recent work, there is an attention to the role of critique in informing change, for instance, regarding the transformation of authority in the second half of the twentieth century, and the 'diverse, successive waves of critique' that have brought

about such transformations (Thévenot, 2010a: 2). His focus is on how critique on ver-
tical hierarchical relations has led to the transformation of what counts as legitimate
authority, and to an increased expectation of the emancipatory potential resulting from
horizontal relations (2010a: 2). These expectations have, however, not been fulfilled
as meaningful politics is increasingly reduced to 'government by the objective', which
in many ways diminishes possibilities of public critique. One conceptual move to
grasp this situation, suggested by Thévenot, is to 'enlarge' the scope of critical social
theory by also focusing on less public forms of engagement, such as engagement in a
plan (an individual project), and engagement in familiarity (to feel at ease in one's
direct environment).

   In sum, in both Boltanski's and Thévenot's recent work, even if in different ways, cri-
tique, the denunciation of oppressive arrangements, and their relation to social change
are central issues. Nevertheless, we would argue that the dimension of the emergence
and institutionalization of the macro-foundations of distinct political forms still remains
an under-conceptualized dimension.

The question of foundation

The brings us to the – strictly related – question of the constitution, foundation, or insti-
tutionalization of a political community, or 'collective polity', and its specific politico-
symbolic registers or justificatory regimes. Critique can implicate part of reality, but it
might also (even if only rarely so) address the political order in its totality (in Boltanski's
terms, the 'reality of the reality' as such). In contemporary political philosophy, the anal-
ysis of foundations has perhaps been most profoundly addressed by Claude Lefort,
whose notion of the 'political' (*le politique*) directly bears on issues of political forms,
their foundation and generative principles, and the differing role of politics in specific
political forms:

> The political is ... revealed, not in what we call political activity, but in the double move-
> ment whereby the mode of institution of society appears and is obscured. It appears in the
> sense that the process whereby society is ordered and unified across the divisions becomes
> visible. It is obscured in the sense that the locus of politics (the locus in which parties com-
> pete and in which a general agency of power takes shape and is reproduced) becomes
> defined as particular, while the principle that generates the overall configuration is con-
> cealed. (1988: 11)

Here, in relation to pragmatic sociology, the question of the political could be rephrased
as 'how is the commonality to which the different polities ultimately refer constituted in
the form of an encompassing, instituted composite or political form?' As argued before,
in *OJ*, this question, and the related issues of constituent power and potential political
violence are not at the forefront. As recently observed by Patrick O'Mahony, 'It is hard
to deduce from Boltanski and Thévenot's micro-sociological "situationism" any sense
of the general common good of society, understood as a moral-legal project. In this sense
the moral-normative dimension of their normative pragmatic theory is certainly weak'
(2009: 495).

We, however, believe that such a moral-normative dimension can in some ways be derived from their work, in particular when read together with later contributions. Indeed, we believe that such a move is necessary. Returning to Lefort, even if he himself predominantly distinguished between absolutistic, totalitarian, and democratic political forms, his views on the political are equally salient for a diversified view of democracy. In the specific language of pragmatic sociology, this implies that democratic regimes themselves will display different relations to democratic politics, and will tend to be based on different composites of justificatory regimes. In other words, now reconnecting politics-as-justification with politics-as-constitution, it would appear that not all societies or political regimes would equally tolerate, or be equipped with, a plurality of regimes of justification and the public openness that would allow the latter to be invoked. Indeed, as Boltanski and Thévenot acknowledge in passing,

> In a universe in which slaves were held in a state that abolished or restricted in extreme the possibility that they could produce critiques, and in which they were consigned through violence in a world in which they became objects, the masters could view themselves as gods and assert their will without having to justify it. (*OJ*: 235)

But (less extreme) forms of closure can also be found in modern democratic societies, and in this regard one could relate pragmatic sociology with distinct approaches in democratic theory that take a critical stance towards contemporary democratic reality. But before we will briefly engage with such a connection, we will first turn to how some relevant steps towards incorporating political dimensions of institutionalization and domination, and the possibility of a radical critique vis-à-vis instituted orders, have already been addressed within the French pragmatic tradition in recent years.

Indeed, in *NSC,* one finds important insights as to how the stability of an existing order – one should bear in mind that it is the capitalist order that is discussed here – is related to the institutionalization of a 'dominant ideology', which always finds itself, however, in potential conflict with contenders. One could rephrase this in political terms, *mutatis mutandis*, as the idea that different political forms inhabit distinct (interpretations of) 'dominant ideologies'.[7] In this, discourses of justification are both about providing self-justification and resources for mobilization for a distinct 'moral-legal project', and involve attempts to ward off, evade, or absorb (parts of) critique.

Thévenot's recent focus is slightly different. Much of his work since *OJ* draws attention to how commonality is constructed 'below the public'. In this, his focus is less on a 'moral-legal project' of instituting a political community, and more on a variety of ways of constructing commonality within a community; in other words, the 'composition of the community, without presuming a common identity' (Thévenot, 2009: 49). At the same time, Thévenot has a pertinent view, and slightly different from that of Boltanski (and Chiapello), regarding the genesis of distinct orders of worth. On his view, distinct orders of worth emerge around new capacities or possibilities of relating to the world, which, when they come to take on a more general, common, and equivalent format, become the object of power politics, in terms of access to these new capabilities and new ways of justifying unequal access to a new form of worth (interview with Thévenot, this issue).

The instituting moment of the wider political community is, however, not explicitly addressed in this. This brings us to *DLC*, which addresses the issues of foundation, institutionalization, and radical critique in a more general manner. Boltanski argues here that 'the tension that the institutions incorporate includes the possibility of critique, so that the formal genesis of institutions is inseparably a formal genesis of critique' (*DLC*: 149). Radical critique, in this regard, would question the foundations or generative principles of an existing order, and point to a profoundly different one. Indeed, Boltanski relates radical critique to the implication of the 'reality of reality' (*la réalité de la réalité*) (*DLC*: 148). Whereas reformist critique tends to re-institutionalize an existing order through 'tests of truth' or 'tests of reality', and in this tends to reconfirm an existing 'reality' or instituted order, or to produce shifts or displacements in justificatory regimes, radical critique, by means of calling for 'tests of existentiality' – often emerging from situations of suffering, humiliation, and injustice – re-opens a pathway to the 'world', indicating novel interpretations of the latter (*DLC*: 163).

In sum, while meta-politics and the issues of constitution, reproduction, and critique of the wider polity are now clearly more prominent in pragmatic sociology, we suggest, however, that more could be said about a normative, critical dimension that has remained largely implicit, and that seems to us inextricably related to notions of pluralism, inquietude, openness, and radical critique.

Pragmatic sociology and radical democracy

It is not least a connection between the theoretical postulation of societal fragility and the impossibility of full semantic closure, on the one hand, and a thrust in pragmatic sociology towards its public disclosure, on the other, that makes it fruitful to relate pragmatic sociology to distinct forms of democratic theory. This exercise is useful, on the one hand, in order to underline and expand the critical capacity of pragmatic sociology as such, but, on the other, it can also be a step towards closing the gap between normative political theory and empirically rich political sociological analysis (as argued, this is rather badly needed in the light of the sterility of much of the theoretical debate in political theory, and the monistic views that reign in both theory and empirical, political analysis).

The implicit, and in *DLC* more explicit, democratic theory that pragmatic sociology seems closest to – even if it originally was not at all intended to elaborate such a theory – is that of a view of democracy that emphasizes contingency, uncertainty, conflict, and the lack of both closure and completion of the democratic project. In this particular sense, pragmatic sociology can be related not only to distinct dimensions of the work of Hannah Arendt (regarding plurality, politics as action, non-foundationalism), but also to the works of radical democratic theorists such as Claude Lefort and Cornelius Castoriadis, the former who underlined the 'dissolution of the markers of certainty' (Lefort, 1988: 19) as a hallmark of democracy, and the latter who endorsed a 'project of an autonomous society' (Castoriadis, 1997: 5).

What emerges from a political-theoretical, normative reading of pragmatic sociology is a democratic order in which an irreducible plurality of understandings of the common good (cf. *OJ*: 14–15), the necessity of openness and transparency, an acceptance of foundational uncertainty, and the impossibility of ending the democratic quest are central. In

particular, in *DLC*, there is an acknowledgement that complex modern societies are virtually always subject to attempts to institute forms of what Boltanski calls 'domination', that is, attempts to overcome the hermeneutic contradiction, to create coherence and closure in order to diminish uncertainty and inquietude. To return to the question of commonality in pragmatic sociology, what is held in common can be related to the notion of domination, in an interpretation of the latter that argues that domination constitutes an attempt to restrict critique of the existing order as far as possible and to present the latter as the only possible interpretation of the world (cf. *DLC*: 176–77). Domination is not based here on the idea of a dominant ideology which serves as a 'mere subterfuge by the dominant to ensure the consent of the dominated'. Rather, a 'majority of those involved – the strong as well as the weak – rely on these schemes in order to represent to themselves the operation, benefits and constraints of the order in which they find themselves immersed' (*NSC*: 11; cf. *AP*: 217).

It would seem to be correct to derive from this that distinct composites or matrixes of regimes of justification (including ways of justifying inequality and forms of differentiation), and their availability for social action, are rather closely related to existing forms of domination. However, while the stability of political domination is to due to the inability of radical critique to emerge, no society will ever be completely immune to critique. In this, any step towards diminishing forms of domination and exclusion, and thus towards an emancipation of the dominated, would need to involve a 'radical change in the political relation to the hermeneutic contradiction, in a way that the latter can be made explicit in equally distributed modalities among all the members of a collectivity' (*DLC*: 228–99). In other words, any form of domination, in which reality is presented as completely coinciding with the world, is to be denounced, while the fragile nature of society's institutions is to become an explicit element of public knowledge. This would also entail the rejection of any recourse to an 'illusory consensus' (*DLC*: 229), as well as

> [a] radical transformation of the relation between instances of confirmation and instances of critique. The pre-eminence would be given to the latter, which, as a result of the fact that these are not institutionalized and could never be, invariably suffer from a deficit of power in relation to the former. In a political form of this type, social reality would therefore be led to recognize itself for what it is, that is to say, in all its fragility and constitutive incompleteness, and to take hold of uncertainty and disparity again, in order to put these in the 'panthéon' of its values, instead of always pretending to absorb these in the name of order and coherence. (*DLC*: 229–30)

What emerges from this depiction of an 'emancipated society' is the need for the political and societal acceptance of modern democratic society's historical and unfinished, as well as incomplete nature. In this, the depiction indeed corresponds with the conceptualizations of democracy by thinkers such as Lefort or Castoriadis. The former, has, at least in one reading of his work (cf. Ingram, 2006), contributed to the conceptualization of democracy as a continuous quest for openness. The latter defined politics as the 'explicit and lucid activity that concerns the instauration of desirable institutions and democracy as the regime of explicit and lucid self-institution, as far as possible, of the social institutions that depend on explicit collective activity' (Castoriadis, 1997: 4). Indeed, democracy was to be a 'regime in which all questions can be raised' (Castoriadis, 1997: 5).

What emerges in both Lefort's and Castoriadis' work, as it was indeed also central to Arendt's, is the question of democracy's foundations or politics-as-constitution. In Castoriadis' radical view, democratic politics is related to constitutive, revolutionary action and a radical reconsideration of the instituted order:

> The creation of politics takes place when the established institution of society is put into question as such and in its various aspects and dimensions (which rapidly leads to the discovery and the explicit elaboration, but also a new and different articulation, of solidarity), that is to say, when *another relation*, previously unknown, is created between the instituted and the instituting. (1991: 160; emphasis added)

Indeed, as in Boltanski's endorsement of the need for a 'radical change in the political relation to the hermeneutic contradiction', Castoriadis' call for 'another relation' can be seen as the idea that a 'society/polity can establish an "other", reflective, reflexive relation to its institutions, laws, instituted imaginary' (Cohen, 2005: 15).

This brings us the question of the relation between politics-as-constitution and the modern idea of revolution. The idea of 'another relation' between the instituted and the instituting calls for a reconceptualization of the modern interpretation of revolution as the birth or new beginning of a political community. In other words, while political revolution in its modern meaning has been predominantly understood as a radical rupture, and as the founding moment of a radically new polity, this understanding obscures the impossibility of full closure under conditions of modernity. As Jeffrey Isaac has argued, '[w]e are without political foundations. Contemporary history has exploded them' (1989: 63). An alternative understanding of revolutions under the modern condition would regard revolutions rather as new beginnings that can never fully turn into durable institutions, but are continuously subject to re-interpretation and re-negotiation. Indeed, according to Hannah Arendt, the revolutionary spirit that has been lost (the 'lost treasure') needs to be retrieved in an order to create a different, reflexive relation between the instituted and instituting. In other words, public freedom needs to be preserved by never really founding a moment of closure but by rather allowing for a continuous readjustment of the instituted through public action, in a kind of continuous, 'revolutionary', but self-limiting form of politics (Arendt, 1990).

We suggest that one way of contributing to the development of such a foundational-revolutionary dimension in pragmatic sociology is by elaborating on, and differentiating, forms of radical critique. We suggest it is important to further elaborate a focus on politics-as-constitution in pragmatic sociology, for instance, by exploring the dimension of what we call politics-as-defiance. In order to connect an analysis of politics-as-justification with politics-as-constitution in a critical way (and, in this, formulating one, even if only partial, answer to Ricoeur's critique), we suggest that the dimension of radical critique could be differentiated in explicit (*dissent*) and implicit forms of critique (*resistance*). Distinct forms of radical critique engage with the foundations of the existing order, and make these visible, in diverse ways. The elaboration of radical critique would need to involve a more explicit engagement with the relation between anti-essentialism and radical critique, the creative process of combining existing polities in a radical critique of the overall order (the latter could indeed be related to dissent), and,

in the final instance, the emergence of alternative views of the democratic polity. But it would also need to engage with those instances of critique that are not necessarily accompanied by more or less clear expressions of an underlying critical theory (this could be referred to as resistance).

Critique, dissent, and resistance

Boltanski notes at the end of DLC that 'in order to go into this direction [that of a revived role of social critique], there undoubtedly does not exist any other way than the way of revolt' (2009: 233). Forms of revolt, or what we propose to differentiate into dissent (a form of vocal, direct revolt) and resistance (a form of non-vocal, indirect revolt), are salient objects of research exactly because they engage with politics-as-constitution. Both dissent and resistance implicate instituted reality and in this constitute a continuous reminder of the tension between reality and the world. Dissent and resistance can be understood as dimensions of critique that are intrinsic to modern societies, even if they are not institutionalized. In this, radical critique seems to be situated at the outer edges of existing regimes of justification, but also, in some instances, move outside of these. Thus, radical critique seems to relate both to an internal moment (emerging from contradiction), and to an external moment of imagination (emerging *ex nihilo*). Both dissent and resistance are, in this, emerging from the 'bottom up', and coincide with pragmatic sociology's interest in the critical capacities of 'ordinary' citizens.

Dissent can indeed be situated in pragmatic sociology as a form of radical critique. However, we believe its conceptual elaboration would need to involve a more explicit problematization of the structural dimension of regimes of justification. This is so, since dissent does not necessarily refer to available understandings of regimes of justification (creativity and imagination become important here) and, rather than merely criticizing one singular regime from the perspective of another, it tends to directly implicate the totality of the existing order. What is more, dissent – in its call for a radical change of reality – does not easily settle for a compromise. In the case of resistance, the theoretical problem is more acute in that critique is often not (clearly) articulated and not in an iterative way. In this, resistance could be situated at the interstice of two regimes of action, those of justification and those of violence (cf. Boltanski, 2005). It should be recognized, though, that there are often more or less clear signs that acts of resistance do implicate instituted reality.

We suggest that the analysis of those types of social action that radically oppose current reality constitutes one way of probing the obscured sides of the political, i.e., of instituted forms of inequality and semantic closure, which tend to be concealed during the political constitution of any political community. The critical regimes of dissent and resistance become particularly important at a period of time in which formal, representative democracy seems to suffer evermore from civic alienation and disenchantment. But it should be noted – remaining faithful to the pragmatic project – that not any instance of radical critique would do here. The invocation of the principle of common humanity in *OJ* refers to those forms of justification and critique that in principle seek to include all human beings concerned, on the basis of an equal standing.

Dissent

Let us first look at the notion of dissent. As a form of social action, dissent can be related to the Greek notion of *parrhesia*,[8] which entails a form of public courage in the 'conscious act of speaking the truth to power at the risk of grave consequences' (Szulecki, forthcoming). *Parrhesia* is put forward in the most direct and unmediated forms of expression. It consists in conveying the truth or the 'way things really are', and is always a critique directed from the less powerful to the powerful (Foucault, 2001: 18). Dissidents, through *parrhesia*, engage in criticizing instituted reality, and depart in this from a refusal to accept a systemic, semantic closure. In this, dissent is relevant to modern societies in general. As Jiri Priban has argued with regard to East European dissidence, 'the experience of anticommunist dissent may be generalised to apply to all modern societies (for communist totalitarianism is a product of modernity as is liberal democracy) as a challenge of any systemic language claiming sovereignty' (2002: 170). Dissent can be related directly to politics-as-constitution in that it does not accept the existing narratives of foundation (or any form of semantic closure, for that matter), or, alternatively, points to the unbridgeable discrepancy between instituted reality and lived social reality.

Dissent in a more structural, enduring sense, i.e., as an 'ethic of dissent' immanent to modern democratic societies, can then be understood as a dimension of democracy that points to the impossibility of its completion and at the inescapable aridification of democracy that results from any attempt at full semantic closure. Dissent is in this not so much about the correction or amelioration of existing procedures, but rather reveals structural problems, and constitutes a tendency of continuous exploration of the possible extension of forms of democracy into *terra incognita*. It is through acts of civil disobedience or dissent that social actors might play an offensive and creative role in the democratization of democracy. Dissent potentially taps into sources of civic creativity that scrutinize the outer limits of predominant understandings of politics and is an attempt to elaborate novel discourses of democratic legitimation.

A good example regards the role of the law and legality in democratic systems. Dissent implicates liberal democracy's dominant legalistic language, as '[h]umanity reduced to human rights and freedoms, that is, humanity as a category of the system of positive law, is a parody of the human condition' (Priban, 2002: 173). In other words, dissent discloses that legality in liberal democracies seeks to portray itself as the exclusive legitimation strategy, as a sovereign and universal language of democratic rights, and tends in this regard to discursive closure, and to contradict 'ideas of democracy, freedom and political plurality' (p. 150). An antifoundationalist spirit that can be related to dissent points to a plurality of democratic discourses and the multi-interpretability of rights and freedoms, and the impossibility of fully institutionalizing democracy once and for all.

In this, the role of civil society as a public setting, or a composite of publics, is crucial in its cultivation of alternative voices and of dissent as an 'ironical struggle against systemic formalism' (p. 162), and in pointing out possible alternatives to the existing order. Dissent keeps the democratic horizon open and versatile, and in this endorses an 'other' relation between the instituting and instituted.

Resistance

While dissent can be largely covered by an extension or diversification of the notion of radical critique, resistance is less easy to grasp in the conceptual terms of pragmatic sociology. The notion of resistance points to other, *sui generis*, dimensions of radical critique, which are, however, not easy to capture in the language of justification and critique, and can be related in some of its instances to an Arendtian notion of new beginnings (not least through its often idiosyncratic engagement with the world).

In *OJ*, there is some recognition of resistance in the discussion of the compromise between the inspired and the civic worlds, in which revolt is seen as 'spontaneous' social action (*OJ*: 296–301). Here, however, we suggest that there is a wider relevance to resistance in that in some of its instances it can be related to a critique of the social and political order as such. It is crucial to note that when we speak of resistance most of the time we do not refer to systematic, formalized types of action. In this, it is important to go beyond an understanding of resistance as necessarily expressed, and exhausted, in violent action, and to include other dimensions such as, for instance, that of a retreat from social life (for instance, in smaller-scale, alternative forms of life in common) or 'abnormal' engagements with reality which indicate tensions with institutionalized forms.[9]

Resistance as a type of social action – and form of critique – is difficult to spell out; indeed, 'resistance' is a complex word, since on the one hand, it seems to suggest a static dimension (a perseverative form of the Latin verb *sto, stare*, 'to stay') or even a mere reaction (as in the German term *Widerstand*, 'to stand against'); on the other, however, there seems to reside a mysterious capacity of transformation at the heart of resistance. This comes through in Deleuze and Guattari's (1991) suggestion that the 'idiot' is the conceptual character of resistance: the idiot hampers the others' work, he resists what everybody else accepts and what everybody else sees no reason to reject.[10] In this, it would be interesting to explore the affinity between resistance and the inspired polity of *OJ*, for instance, in terms of 'foolishness', asceticism, spontaneity, and creativity (*OJ*: 85–90).

As observed, instances of resistance are often associated with violence rather than with justification or critique. But here the issue of a politics of definition of the employed terms becomes inescapable, for the boundaries of what is to be explained are far from self-evident. When should a social act be qualified as peaceful, and when is it to be categorized as wordless violence? In the twilight between justificatory regimes and regimes of violence, one finds a zone which is neither 'submerged by violence' nor completely immune to it. We must try to theoretically account for those acts that imbibe justification and violence half-way. In this, we suggest that the differentiation between the regimes of justification and regimes of violence, as identified by Boltanski (2005), and in particular those instances in which they overlap, could be explored further.

To sum up, both dissent and resistance seem to pose a real challenge to pragmatic sociology, dissent in that it engages with the totality of the institutionalized order in an unmediated way, and resistance in that the critique expressed is often not transparent or even ambiguous, and oscillates between the language of violence and that of implicit criticism.

Conclusion

The pragmatic sociology of critique, even if not intended as such, offers a framework which can inspire the development of a critical, political sociology of democracy. While in its most important statement, Boltanski and Thévenot's *OJ*, a critical and comparative perspective on the political was not at the forefront, we have shown that in later works, in particular, Boltanski's *DLC*, such a perspective, in both normative and analytical terms, is indeed outlined. If our assessment of the monism of democratic theory and empirical political analysis is indeed correct, pragmatic sociology might offer the analytical language that allows us to step out of a narrative of democracy that equates the democratic experience with increased rationalization and a prospective of consensus on its key features. In this, it helps us to explore the plurality of democratic languages and justifications, the complexities of an always fragile but nevertheless persisting social and political order, the unavoidable and indispensable forms of conflict and critique, and the irreducible openness and inquietude that characterize democracy. We have suggested including in this exploration the radical critical forms of dissent and resistance, as it is indeed the investigation of the latter that might not only help us to outline the contours of the existing order, but also to imagine possible new forms of democratic life.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1. We have decided to focus on the works of these two prominent authors here, although we obviously acknowledge that many other authors have contributed to the approach.
2. For the idea of a 'closed democratic universalism', see Rosanvallon (2009). For an elaboration of the problem of closure in democracy, see Keenan (2003).
3. The explicit comparative-empirical extension of the model to political disputes is most evident in Lamont and Thévenot (2000) and Thévenot (2006).
4. The well-known distinction is between politics (*la politique*) and the political or polity (*le politique*).
5. In this, at least in one – admittedly somewhat superficial – reading, Boltanski and Thévenot seem to risk coming close to the acceptance of a conflation of political modernity with the existing institutionalization of politics (i.e., as the liberal-representative model of the democratic polity, in which formal politics is confined to the distinct sphere of political society or the political system).
6. In the words of Ricoeur, 'the question that one starts to ask oneself is whether the political is correctly approached in terms of economies of worth' (Ricoeur, 1995: 80). Thus, he asks, 'Is the civic city – the strangeness of the term should put us on our guard – a city like all the others? Is the paradox of this city not that it also encompasses all the other cities?' (Ricoeur, 1994: 280).

7. This is also not unlike the way Thévenot has built on *OJ* in a 'synchronic' comparative study (Thévenot, 2009: 49) of the different 'weight' of orders of worth in different societies (*CCS*).
8. See, in particular, Foucault (2001).
9. In this regard, Boltanski speaks of a 'judgment of normality' that applies to forms of protest, a failure of which leads to the labeling of the protest as not normal or 'paranoid' (*DLC*: 152–53).
10. This is, for instance, a recurrent charge that is made to the newly appointed land surveyor in Kafka's *The Castle*. Literary work hosts a number of these uncomfortable, uncanny figures of resistance. The idiot challenges the taken-for-granted, the consensual hegemonic definition of the situation, or, in Boltanski's terms, the 'reality of the reality'. In this, the character of resistance is static, but potentially produces transformation, or sets in motion a whole ensemble of relations in unpredictable ways: the idiotic Bartleby induces the Wall Street lawyer to ask himself a number of questions that he never asked himself before (Herman Melville's *A Story of Wall Street*).

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